

Roman Gardens

-from Calypso to Cucumbers

Nicholas Purcell

Roman gardening begins with Homer. 'A flourishing wood grew round the cave, tall poplar and scented cypress, where different kinds of birds roosted and fluttered their wings birds of land and sea alike. A vigorous vine loaded with bunches of grapes was trained round the opening of the cave: four springs ran with clear water in a dense pattern of rivulets; the water meadows around were lush with fritillaries and cow-parsley.' Like the orchard of King Alcinous or the flowery field in which Hera seduces Zeus, this scene, the cave of the nymph Calypso, lies behind many a Roman's idea of a garden: in Antiquity there is a good deal more to a garden than just plants.

The Mediterranean landscape has an important part to play. Shade and running water are luxuries and so form the basis of every Mediterranean garden. Many charming spots occur quite naturally, of course: a spring overhung with mossy rocks waters several enormous trees, which give a deep quiet shade. Improving and reconstructing these places is at the heart of ancient gardening. Since a farmer cannot neglect any source of water, there is a strong connexion for the ancients between gardens and agriculture, and the well-watered orchard or the shady vineyard are as much ancestors of the developed gardens of Antiquity as are the natural cave or grove. Finally, these charming natural resorts, giving repose to the farmer and life to his crops, usually attract the worship of the gods. The divine associations of spring, cavern and wood are present as much in reality as in the Homeric landscape.

Pleasure gardens

These associations – the natural resort, the pleasant farm, the home of gods – are the commonest ingredients of the ancient idea of a garden. All ancient cities were surrounded by a belt of gardens for pleasure, profit or burial; one thinks of Cicero's Tusculan villa – or of Gethsemane. Every little town had its favourite excursion-places in the vicinity – a perennial spring and stream, a grove of trees with a dusty floor, a temple and perhaps a shady colonnade. In the case of big cities these resorts were luxurious and well known – or infamous for their pleasures, like Canopus near Alexandria. The *alameda* of a Spanish country town, or a park like Rhodini in Rhodes, is today precisely the sort of place one would have found in the ancient world; most Mediterranean towns still have a suburban monastery or belvedere useful for a picnic on a day off.

A vivid and little-known example is to be found near Rome In a stretch of countryside by chance almost unspoiled by the city's disastrous sprawl. In a grove of trees beside a fast but polluted stream is a vigorous mineral spring called the Acqua Santa di Roma, which is commercially bottled under the name of King Nurna's mistress, the nymph Egeria (whose

real spring was in fact elsewhere). After work, scores of local people come to fill their own jars and bottles at the spring and to spend half an hour strolling in the grove or on the banks of the stream, and the atmosphere is very like that of an ancient suburban garden. Socrates' philosophising by the Ilissus, or the rough-and-tumble through the myrtle-thickets in the sanctuary of Venus at Cnidos, described by Petronius, take place in settings like this.

Allusive decorations

It was as the setting for intellectual activities (Socrates and Phaedrus rather than Petronius' Encolpius and Giton) that ancient gardens took on a cerebral air which is not to be found in modern horticulture. Once the suburban parks of Athens, like the Lyceum and the Academy, had become famous centres of more or less casual instruction, gardening became closely associated with the pursuit of wisdom. The theatre made its contribution too, since the suburban sanctuary and its environs made a good place for a spectacle or a festival. The tastes of those who could afford fashion became increasingly complicated, and gardens increasingly cluttered with allusive decorations.

By the Roman era no garden was complete without a dozen herms of well-known sages, a sprinkling of comic and tragic masks, and perhaps the odd sculptural tableau – which takes us, as it was supposed to take the admiring onlooker, back to the *Odyssey*. The emperor Tiberius built himself a handsome villa on the Tyrrhenian coast around a large natural cave looking out across a bay to the headland on which the fishing-village of Sperlonga now stands. By means of statues of Odysseus and his frightened companions, and of the Cyclops, arranged at appropriate places, the whole cave was made into a re-creation of Polyphemus' lair. In the middle was a fish-pond supplied with sea-water, and there was ample room for the emperor to have dinner. Now Tiberius was well known for his mythological interests – it was he who used to ask what song the Sirens sang (perhaps he wanted a suitable acoustic accompaniment for his tableaux) – but this sort of décor was actually very common among those who could afford it.

Nature and Culture

We are, of course, now talking about the Very Rich. They had even more extravagant tastes than this. One was a penchant for feeling that they were creating natural landscape. Unlike Repton or Capability Brown, Roman landscape gardeners concentrated on small-scale modifications, a terrace here or a mound there, rather than hundreds of acres of parkland, and their technique was always more symbolic than illusionistic; and they had a taste for paradox. It was pleasantly piquant to put a garden on the roof – or on piers over the sea – or in the centre of a crowded city. But if you lived in the country anyway a cluster of buildings or a mock curtain wall with tiny turrets could give you the feeling that your villa was a small town. Wherever you were, representations of lakes, woods and even mountains could be arranged, and an artificial Calypso's cave was a commonplace. But for every satisfied householder admiring his marble satyr leering at a cluster of bronze nymphs by the new pool in the second peristyle, there was a stern moralist to point out that this landscape-fantasy was

flying in the face of Nature, and therefore anything but virtuous: and it is from the catalogues of things to be avoided in writers who take this tone that our most vivid pictures of the excesses of Roman garden design come.

This fashion is vulgar indeed, but, for once, the vulgarity is not purely Roman. Certainly the Romans saw their great bridges, harbours and aqueducts as tampering with Nature in a big and rather satisfying way. But their view goes right back to the Hellenistic kings and to Alexander himself, who was very struck, it is said, with the idea of turning the whole of Mt. Athos (which is twenty miles long) into a statue of himself. In fact the wish to be seen to rule Nature as well as man probably goes back to the Persians and beyond.

Domesticated hunting

It was certainly the oriental traditions which gave the ancient garden another distinctive element – the hunting-park or *paradeisos*. When the Greeks came across the *paradeisoi* of Persian magnates the idea of this domesticated and exclusive form of hunting greatly appealed to them. It became fashionable to collect rare animals, and many a country estate became a veritable menagerie. Down in the woods where Virgil makes Aeneas first set foot on Latin soil was the elephant reserve of the Roman emperor, for instance; the demands of the amphitheatre had by that time given extra point to this enthusiasm. Mildly erudite collecting appealed to the Roman upper class (Augustus had a taste for fossils) and several garden-villas are known to have had displays of natural curiosities. There was competition about stocking your grounds with exotic plants, and the plane and the cherry and probably the chestnut were first seen in Italy and points west in the gardens of wealthy Romans. The learned Varro – was he thinking of the birds in Calypso's trees? – built himself in the first century BC a vastly complicated aviary on his country estate, and the fishponds of the rich became notorious: a learned collection was much more fun if it enriched the dinner table too.

Nero and the plebs

The hunting-games of the Roman amphitheatre develop out of this world of domestic spectacle and curiosity-collections. Just as in private gardens, so in the arena, a landscape is created as a setting for the hunt, and the variety and rarity of the animals is a source of pride. Like the great Baths, the *venationes* of Rome are an adaptation of an upper-class luxury to pamper and flatter the ordinary people of the capital; the more recent history of sport has parallel cases of elite pastimes winning a huge popular following.

The Colosseum is a particularly good example, because it was built, like the big baths of Titus and of Trajan in the same period, on the site of one of the more extreme private gardens of antiquity, that of the Golden House of Nero. Notoriously, the people of Rome had felt snubbed and excluded by Nero's private aesthetic excesses: his successors found it expedient to demonstrate how different they were by redeveloping the palace and *paradeisos* to admit the Roman people to precisely the activities from which they had previously been excluded. Nero's fantasy-palace imitated landscape – there were woods, and water and even farmland,

we are told – but went further still and attempted to reproduce the cosmos itself in the form of a revolving dining-room whose movements were based on astronomical principles.

When next an emperor tried something on this scale (and one might observe that Otho, a successor of Nero's, found the Golden House very uncomfortable, for all its subtlety), he made sure that it was out of the public eye. Unlike the Golden House, Hadrian's astonishing complex of buildings and gardens in the countryside near Tivoli has survived to give us our clearest view of what this style of garden-architecture could produce. A biographer of Hadrian tells us that he insisted on naming the different parts of the villa after the principal tourist attractions of the Empire: we are still in the world of cultured imitation.

Cucumbers and trees

But what actually grew in the gardens? As we have seen, there was a strong utilitarian tradition, and the Romans were always sensible enough not to grow begonias or gladioli. They chose plants for smell, shade or produce. Roses and violets were therefore the commonest flowers, and were often grown for garlands in the little plots around suburban tombs, with a few fruit trees or vegetables. Even for the poor these places provided a retreat in the country, and we hear on tomb inscriptions of many such gardens, equipped with a well, a dining-room or a leafy bower. This humbler horticulture appealed even to emperors; Tiberius invented a cold-frame for forcing cucumbers, which is precisely the sort of perversion of natural rhythms which the moralists attack: but even Seneca forgot his ethics when it came to the proverbially costly embellishment of his gardens, so perhaps we can forgive Tiberius his cucumbers.

In recent years the technique which produced the gruesome casts of the victims of the eruption at Pompeii has been applied to the holes left by plant roots and has given us new and vivid information about the gardens there. In between the houses vegetable-patches, orchards and vineyards have been found. It has also become clear that the atria and peristyles of the houses were not filled with box and oleander as the reconstructions imply, but with trees, some of them old and large. We shouldn't have been surprised, though: paintings too (the most famous is the lovely garden room from Livia's villa) show that trees were the Roman's main delight in gardens, more even than the herms and artificial grottoes.

Tacitus tells the story of how the evil Messallina coveted the gardens of an ex-consul – she got them, indeed, by typically foul means, and it was there, two years later, that she was executed on Claudius' orders. The former owner was compelled to suicide, and in a gesture which parodied the sang-froid of those grim political suicides which so characterized the age, devoted his last care to ensuring that the smoke from his funeral pyre did not damage the foliage of the rare and beautiful trees with which he had decorated the garden for which he was dying.

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